

05/19/21 Wednesday

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Tesla Driver Reportedly Slept as Vehicle Traveled Over 80 Mph, Wisconsin Police Say
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Electric car company Tesla first introduced its Autopilot mode in 2014, and in the years since, the setting has been at the center of various police reports that cite drivers as asleep at the wheel or otherwise preoccupied. The automaker has repeatedly noted that its vehicles are not fully autonomous and require attentive drivers.

A newly surfaced report from Wisconsin's Kenosha County Sheriff's Department has revealed that authorities recently pulled over a Tesla driver who appeared to be fully asleep at the wheel - all while their vehicle was traveling over 80 mph.

The [Tuesday release](#) reveals that the incident unfolded on Sunday at approximately 7:51 a.m. local time on the northbound lanes of Interstate 94 near the Illinois-Wisconsin state line.

The Tesla driver, later identified as a 38-year-old man from Palatine, Illinois, was described as being "asleep" as his "head was down and [he] was not looking at the road," a deputy with Kenosha County detailed in an incident report.

Although the deputy's initial attempt to pull over the Tesla vehicle was unsuccessful, the law enforcement official was able to gain the attention of the driver on a second attempt. However, the success only came after the deputy followed behind the vehicle for approximately 2 miles at 82 mph, and then pulled alongside the Tesla.

The release from the sheriff's department further states that the driver denied being asleep, but did admit to having been "tired." The deputy did not report the Tesla driver as showing signs of impairment.

The vehicle was cited as being a 2019 Tesla with Autopilot capability. As for the driver, he was issued a citation for inattentive driving.

Tesla's semi-autonomous Autopilot feature has been repeatedly linked to multiple road collisions. In fact, a Tesla that was being operated with its Autopilot mode was involved in a crash on Saturday in Washington state that left ["significant damage"](#) to a parked police cruiser. Earlier, police in California [arrested](#) a 25-year-old man who was sitting in the backseat of a Tesla while it was operating under its Autopilot mode, traveling across the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge.

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Trump Blasts 'Corrupt' New York Criminal Probe, Deems Effort Part of Political 'Witch Hunt'
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Earlier, the New York attorney general's office announced that it would be pursuing a criminal investigation into the Trump Organization in conjunction with the Manhattan district attorney's office. The attorney general's office had already launched a civil inquiry into the organization. Former US President Donald Trump lashed out at both state and local prosecutors in New York on Wednesday over the newly-announced joint criminal investigation into the Trump Organization.

Trump blasted both New York Attorney General Letitia James and Manhattan District Attorney Cyrus Vance, Jr., noting that the pair are giving life to a political "witch hunt" against the former commander-in-chief that first began in the nation's capital during his time in the White House. "There is nothing more corrupt than an investigation that is in desperate search of a crime. But, make no mistake, that is exactly what is happening here," Trump wrote in a [900-word statement](#) that called for officials to redirect their attention in order to better curb murder and drug cases in New York City.

"But the district attorney and attorney general are possessed, at an unprecedented level, with destroying the political fortunes of [former] President Donald J. Trump and the almost 75 million people who voted for him."

The former president reiterated that the probe is simply a "continuation of the greatest political witch hunt in the history of the United States," and that James and Vance are "working in conjunction with Washington [officials]" in order to "silence and cancel millions of voters because they don't want 'Trump' to run again."

"After prosecutorial efforts the likes of which nobody has ever seen before, they failed to stop me in Washington, so they turned it over to New York to do their dirty work. This is what I have been going through for years. It's a very sad and dangerous tale for our country, but it is what it is, and we will overcome [it] together," Trump continued.

He closed the lengthy statement by underscoring that "New York would be great and free again" only once prosecutors turn their attention to the "real issues."

Although Trump mentioned James was out to get him before she took on the attorney general role, her office has only been officially investigating the Trump Organization after Michael Cohen, who previously served as Trump's personal lawyer, testified in 2018 that Trump had previously inflated his financial assets in order to obtain favorable loans.

While Trump did not namecheck Cohen, he did refer to his former attorney as a "lying, discredited low life, who was not listened to or given credibility by other prosecutorial offices, and sentenced to 3 years in prison for lying and other events unrelated to me."

Cohen previously pleaded guilty to tax evasion and campaign finance violations, and is currently under house arrest as he wraps up on his 3-year sentence.

Incidentally, after the joint criminal investigation was announced, Cohen took the opportunity to share a [photoshopped image](#) of Trump in jail, writing in a tweet that Trump and company would soon be "held responsible for their actions." Cohen was once a fervent defender of Trump, even after he claimed the US presidency.

The New York attorney general's office informed the Trump Organization of its new criminal probe on Tuesday, later [revealing](#) to the public that the joint effort would be examining "possibly extensive and protracted criminal conduct" that encompasses tax and insurance fraud, as well as falsified business records.

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'Determined to Continue': Netanyahu Brushes Off Biden's 'De-escalation' Call in Gaza Strip
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

US President Joe Biden spoke earlier with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The commander-in-chief relayed that he expected a "significant de-escalation" regarding the recent deadly clashes along the Gaza Strip. To date, thousands of rockets have been launched between Israeli and Palestinian forces, with the death toll rising.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu appeared to brush off Biden's pressing calls for a cease-fire on Wednesday, telling reporters that operations along the Gaza Strip would continue until objectives are met.

Netanyahu's latest remarks came after he had already held a telephone conversation with Biden earlier in the day, and also toured a military headquarters. The prime minister stated that while he "greatly appreciates the support of the American president," the ongoing military operation against Hamas' military wing would stay the course.

"I am determined to continue this operation until its goal is achieved - to bring back peace and security to you, the citizens of Israel," Netanyahu [said](#), pointing out that "every day we are hitting more capabilities of the terror organizations, bringing down more terror towers, hitting more weapons caches."

The raging Israeli-Hamas conflict is currently on its tenth day, with rocket exchanges mounting and world leaders urging both sides to ease tensions and call a cease-fire.

A [White House readout](#) of Biden and Netanyahu's conversation noted that the pair spoke on a variety of issues stemming from the violent clashes, including diplomatic efforts by regional partners. "The president conveyed to the prime minister that he expected a significant de-escalation today on the path to a cease-fire," reads the release.

However, moments after Biden's message to Netanyahu made headline news, it appeared early on that a de-escalation was not likely to take place soon, especially after the Israel Defense Forces tweeted that it had struck [two buildings](#) in Gaza.

Earlier, the IDF revealed that some [4,000 rockets](#) had been fired toward Israel since renewed tensions emerged, and that IDF jets had struck [40 underground](#) Hamas targets.

Although Netanyahu has put off mention of a cease-fire, Mousa Abu Marzook, a senior Hamas official, [told](#) Lebanon's al-Mayadeen TV that he anticipated a mutual agreement being "reached within a day or two." Similar sentiments were [previously voiced](#) by IDF Chief of Staff Aviv Kohavi, who also indicated that military operations would remain "as long as it must."

Hostilities in the region have prompted the deaths of hundreds of Palestinians, many of whom were women and children. In Israel, officials indicated that at least a dozen have been killed, including at least two children.

Tensions in the region recently broke out after authorities restricted access to the al-Aqsa Mosque for Palestinians, with escalations being kicked up a notch after courts cleared the eviction of several Palestinian families from the Sheikh Jarrah area.

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McConnell Declares Opposition to Jan. 6 Commission After Trump Decries Plan as 'Partisan Unfairness'

by [Evan Craighead](#)

The US House of Representatives is slated to vote on legislation that calls for the formation of a commission to investigate the deadly January 6 riot on Capitol Hill. Though the bill has received bipartisan support, some Republicans have questioned the commission's independence. If passed by the House, the measure will advance to the US Senate.

Speaking to fellow lawmakers from the Senate floor on Wednesday, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell formally announced opposition to the formation of a Capitol riot commission. "After careful consideration, I've made the decision to oppose the House Democrats' slanted and unbalanced proposal for another commission to study the events of January the 6th," McConnell said.

The Senate Minority Leader went on to emphasize that law enforcement agencies have made "at least 445 arrests" and hundreds have been charged for their alleged roles in the Capitol riot. "Bipartisan investigations are also underway, and have been for months," he said, noting that several congressional committees are probing the topic. "It's not at all clear what new facts, or additional investigation yet another commission could actually lay on top of existing efforts by law enforcement and Congress."

The Senate Minority Leader's comments come hours after former US President Donald Trump issued a blog post calling on Republicans in Congress to oppose the "Democrat trap of the January 6 Commission."

"It is just more partisan unfairness and unless the murders, riots, and fire bombings in Portland, Minneapolis, Seattle, Chicago, and New York are also going to be studied, this discussion should be ended immediately," [Trump wrote](#). "Republicans must get much tougher and much smarter, and stop being used by the Radical Left. Hopefully, Mitch McConnell and Kevin McCarthy are listening!"

Even before Trump's Monday night post, House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy came out in opposition of the commission, [decrying the](#) move as politically misguided and "potentially counterproductive."

At the same time, Republican lawmakers, like Sen. Susan Collins (R-ME) have expressed support for a nonpartisan commission.

"I think it would be valuable in terms of establishing exactly what happened, and for lessons learned," Collins said on Wednesday.

She also argued that House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) was to blame for the bill's partisan nature.

"If I had been the Speaker, I would have reached out to him and talked to him about how it should have been drafted. I would have reached out to Kevin McCarthy," Collins remarked. "She did neither. So I think the fact that we're in this situation now is due to the lack of outreach."

The proposed commission would be tasked with investigating the events that led up to the storming of the US Capitol building in Washington, DC, on January 6. Although Donald Trump has not been charged in association with the riot and called on those participating in the Capitol building storming to "go home now," politicians from both sides of the aisle have tied the incident to the former US president's "Save America" rally that occurred the same day.

The January 6 event resulted in the deaths of five individuals and damages totaling more than \$30 million, according to Capitol architect J. Brett Blanton. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Director Christopher Wray has characterized the riot as an act of domestic terrorism.

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US House Passes Legislation on Forming Independent Commission to Probe Capitol Riot
by [Evan Craighead](#)

House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) have both issued statements denouncing the proposed bipartisan legislation. The GOP leaders have argued that law enforcement officials and a number of congressional committees are already probing the Capitol riot, which resulted in five deaths.

With a 252-175 vote, the US House of Representatives has passed H.R. 3233, a measure that seeks to create an independent, 9/11-style commission to investigate the deadly January 6 riot at the US Capitol building.

A total of 35 Republicans voted in favor of the legislation, which was drawn up by House Homeland Security Chair Bennie Thompson (D-MS) and Rep. John Katko (R-NY), the House Homeland Security's ranking Republican.

While some skeptics of the bill have questioned the independence of the proposed commission, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) has argued that a bipartisan commission "commands the respect of the American people by dint of the caliber of people who will serve on it."

"I certainly could call for hearings in the House with a majority of the members being Democrats with full subpoena power, with the agenda being determined by the Democrats. But that's not the path we have chosen to go," she said.

The bill now advances to the US Senate, where it is expected to once again face opposition from Republican leadership.

"Bipartisan investigations are also underway, and have been for months," [McConnell said](#) to fellow lawmakers from the Senate floor on Wednesday. "It's not at all clear what new facts, or additional investigation yet another commission could actually lay on top of existing efforts by law enforcement and Congress."

It is possible that McConnell or another lawmaker may filibuster the measure.

US President Joe Biden's administration has expressed support for the bill, detailing in a May 18 memo that the White House "supports the proposed bipartisan, independent National Commission to study and investigate the facts and circumstances surrounding the January 6, 2021 attack on the Capitol."

"The Nation deserves such a full and fair accounting to prevent future violence and strengthen the security and resilience of our democratic institutions," the issuance concluded.

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'Death, Displacement': AOC Leads 'Progressive' Dems' Push to Block US Arms Sale to Israel
by [Evan Craighead](#)

It was reported earlier this week that the Biden administration had approved a potential sale of \$735 million worth of precision-guided missiles to Israel. As the Israeli-Palestinian conflict persists, some lawmakers have called on Washington to stop arming Tel Aviv.

Reps. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY), Mark Pocan (D-WI) and Rashida Tlaib (D-MI) issued a statement on Wednesday announcing the introduction of [a joint resolution](#) in the US House of Representatives that seeks to prohibit the "transfer of defense articles, including defense services and technical data" to Israel.

"For decades, the US has sold billions of dollars in weaponry to Israel without ever requiring them to respect basic Palestinian rights. In so doing, we have directly contributed to the death, displacement and disenfranchisement of millions," Ocasio-Cortez said in a quoted statement.

"At a time when so many, including President Biden, support a ceasefire, we should not be sending 'direct attack' weaponry to Prime Minister Netanyahu to prolong this violence."

Other lawmakers sponsoring the resolution include Reps. Cori Bush (D-MI), Betty McCollum (D-MN), Ayanna Pressley (D-MA), Ilhan Omar (D-MN), Pramila Jayapal (D-WA) and André Carson (D-IN).

The lawmakers' move comes a day after House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Gregory Meeks (D-NY) and other senior House Democrats called off their push to make Biden delay the arms deal.

"What we wanted to do is to have a dialogue," Meeks said on Tuesday, noting that Biden planned to hold an "informational session" for members of Congress on Wednesday.

One unnamed lawmaker pushed back against Meeks' reasoning, [telling Politico](#) "the question is whether it would be wise to announce licensing now while the bombing is ongoing and we are trying to encourage a cease-fire."

As of this article's publication, the Israeli Air Force has claimed that Hamas militants have fired an estimated 4000 rockets toward Israel, and have killed at least 10 people. Palestinian health authorities report that they have recorded at least 212 deaths, including 61 children.

On Wednesday, amid rumors on when the ceasefire between Israel and Hamas might take place, Moussa Abu Marzouk, a Hamas political official, suggested that a ceasefire will be made in the coming days.

"I think that the ongoing efforts regarding the ceasefire will succeed," the senior Hamas official [told](#) Lebanon's al-Mayadeen TV. "I expect a ceasefire to be reached within a day or two, and the ceasefire will be on the basis of mutual agreement."

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Tributes Pour in After Actor, Comedian Paul Mooney Dies of Heart Attack at Age 79
by [MariTi Blaise Lovell](#)

Paul Mooney was a comedian, writer and actor known for his work with famed comedian Richard Pryor, as well as his portrayal of Sam Cooke in "The Buddy Holly Story" and Junebug in Spike Lee's film, "Bamboozled." He also wrote for 1970s sitcoms "Sanford and Son" and "Good Times," and the comedy sketch show "In Living Color."

Mooney died on Wednesday at 5:30 a.m. local time at his home in Oakland, California. The cause of death was determined to be a heart attack.

The Louisiana native's daughter, Spring Mooney, [confirmed](#) the comedian's death in an emotional tweet, in which she acknowledged having just lost her best friend. "I really can't put into words right now my feelings," Spring wrote.

Helene Shaw, Mooney's agent, confirmed a heart attack was the cause of death to [USA Today](#). According to [TMZ](#), the comedian had been suffering from an onset of dementia.

"The brilliant, talented, one of a kind, comedian, Paul Mooney has passed away. He died of a heart attack. There are many stars in the sky, but there will always be only ONE MOON," Shaw told the outlet.

The comedian's official Twitter page has begun to send out tributes, proclaiming Mooney as the "Godfather of Comedy," as many reminisce on the power of his presence.

Many celebrities have also taken to social media to express their condolences.

"RIP comedy legend Paul Mooney! You were both funny and poignant. So happy to have witnessed your genius live. Rest well!!! Pour down some laughter here. We need it, " actress Viola Davis wrote on [Twitter](#), calling Mooney a "comedy legend."

"RIP TO ONE OF MY COMEDY HEROES," fellow comedian Tracy Morgan also wrote on [Twitter](#).

Mooney was known for speaking on topical information based around race and racism in America. He held a deep philosophical view of the world, expressed in a sometimes brash and straightforward way.

Director and producer Robert Townsend, who cast Mooney in the 1987 movie "Hollywood Shuffle," recalled the comedian fondly in a [2016 Vulture interview](#). "Paul didn't care to be loved. He wanted to speak his mind," Townsend said. "He taught a generation of comedians to be fearless."

In 2004, Mooney landed a role in a couple of skits on close friend and comic Dave Chappelle's popular TV series, "Chappelle's Show."

Mooney always spoke highly of Chappelle, as both comedians expanded each other's presence in the comedic world. "We need people who are talented, creative and speak the truth," Mooney [said](#) of Chappelle in an interview with the New York Post in 2006.

"It's a dying breed."

Chappelle responded to Mooney's death in an interview with [TMZ](#), saying that Mooney's legacy will "live forever," and that he will be "sorely missed." Chappelle underscored that Mooney was one of the greatest comedians "ever."

Mooney was the writer behind some of Pryor's greatest comedy hits, such as "Richard Pryor: Live on the Sunset Strip" and "The Richard Pryor Show." His friendship and collaboration with Pryor began in 1968 and lasted until Pryor's death in 2005. Mooney chronicled their partnership in confronting race and racism during his 2007 memoir, "Black Is the New White."

So far, there has been no announcement from his estate about a funeral service.

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Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta Appoints Martha Koome as Country's First Female Chief Justice

by [MariTi Blaise Lovell](#)

Martha Karambu Koome, who served as an appeals judge in Kenya, noted in her interview for chief justice that she would work to reduce the backlog of cases in Kenya's Supreme Court, facilitate the appointment of additional judges and magistrates, operationalize the judiciary fund to promote independence, and promote the use of technology.

Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta on Wednesday appointed Koome to serve as the country's next chief justice, effectively marking her as the first woman to hold the judicial post.

Kenyatta confirmed Koome's appointment just a few hours after the Kenyan Parliament approved her nomination. Koome is scheduled to take the oath of office on Thursday.

"In exercise powers conferred by ... the constitution. I, Uhuru Kenyatta, president and commander-in-chief of the Kenya Defense Forces, appoint Martha Karambu Koome to be the chief justice of the Republic of Kenya," Kenyatta's announcement said, according to the

[Associated Press](#).

Koome is set to replace former Chief Justice David Maraga, who made history by leading the Kenyan Supreme Court when it annulled Kenyatta's 2017 reelection victory, a move that ordered new voting within 60 days over election illegalities and irregularities. At the time, Maraga revealed that he had received death threats following the court's 4-2 decision against Kenyatta.

Koomes was picked by the Judicial Service Commission (JSC) from a pool of nine other candidates, including judges, prominent lawyers in private practice and law scholars.

During Koome's [April interview](#) before the JSC, the legal official referenced her difficult experience growing up in Meru, in rural eastern Kenya in a polygamous family.

"I am a villager in the truest sense. My parents were peasant farmers and we were 18 children from two mothers. So, for all of us, especially girls - it was a struggle to overcome the odds," she said. Koome was born in 1960, three years before the end of British colonial rule in the region. Koome, when asked how she would tackle issues facing the judicial system, said the position requires top-notch managerial skills that could come from anyone with the right experience regardless of gender.

"I believe the challenges are similar whether a male or female," she told the panel, adding "leadership is gender-neutral, it doesn't require a man or woman."

Fred Ngatia, a lawyer who was included in the pool of chief justice candidates, has cast some doubts on how the JSC chose Koome, alleging the selection process had been rigged. Ngatia has handled high level matters, including cases for Kenyatta, the Kenyan government and its ministries, such as the Ministry of Interior and Coordination of National Government.

Incidentally, Ngatia also represented Kenyatta in 2013 and 2017, after Raila Odinga, former Kenyan prime minister, challenged Kenyatta's win in both elections at the Supreme Court level.

"Four commissioners from Mt Kenya reduced my scores yesterday afternoon after they were called by powerful people," Ngatia told the [Business Daily](#) after the JSC's announcement.

"Without that intervention, I was far ahead of all the other candidates."

Ngatia was originally cited by [media outlets](#) as the next Kenyan chief justice to succeed Maraga. Professor Olive Mugenda, who chaired the JSC interviews, said the commission will not release the scores for each candidate. "Our duty was to select the best candidate and that's what we have done," she said.

The Muslims for Human Rights (Muhuri) group has also [expressed concern](#) over Koome's appointment, suggesting there are ethical and integrity questions. Chairman Khelef Khalifa, on Wednesday said that the special session held to approve Koome's appointment was "highly suspect," and that Kenyans should be "very wary and alert."

Khalifa added that there are court cases seeking to compel JSC to make public the scores of all the candidates interviewed for the seat.

Koome was appointed as a judge in 2003 and served on the African Union Committee on the Rights and Welfare of Children between 2005 and 2010. According to local outlet [Modern Ghana](#), Koome is a chairwoman of a special task force on children.

Many netizens have also come out to congratulate her on social media.

Koome now faces the task of adjudicating any challenge to the upcoming presidential election, which is scheduled to be held in August 2022.

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US National Guard Troops Deployed After Capitol Riot Will Return Home Sunday, Reports Say by [MariTi Blaise Lovell](#)

US National Guard troops were dispatched to Washington, DC, following the January 6 storming of the US Capitol by hundreds of people, including supporters of ex-US President Donald

Trump, to challenge the results of the 2020 election. There were discussions in Congress this week about establishing a permanent military unit at the federal building.

Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby declared on Wednesday that thousands of National Guard troops who were deployed to protect the US Capitol after the violent insurrection will be heading back home this weekend, as their mission is expected to wrap up by May 23.

"We have received no request to extend [the stay of troops in the nation's capital]," Kirby told reporters at the Pentagon.

There were about 5,200 National Guard troops deployed around the White House after the Capitol uproar on January 6. As of Wednesday, the number of National Guards has [dropped to 2,149](#).

In March, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin approved a request from the US Capitol Police to [extend](#) the National Guard mission from March to May 23. In the approval, it underscored concerns about the ongoing threat of violence after rioters breached the building in violence that left five people dead.

The decision proved controversial, as many lawmakers have criticized congressional leaders for the length of the mission and questioned the fencing surrounding the Capitol.

The Capitol security measures were reviewed in a [report](#) released in March, and included suggestions such as creating a quick reactionary military force to assist Capitol Police. Such measures would involve installing retractable fencing, as well as establishing a new federal agency to coordinate the region's law enforcement during emergencies, similar to how the Department of Homeland Security operates.

Earlier this week, Rep. Rosa DeLauro (D-CT) and other lawmakers within the US House of Representatives proposed \$531 million to cover the ongoing cost of the guard's deployment to the Capitol, and another [\\$200 million](#) to mobilize a quick reactionary military force. Additionally, the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on the Military mentioned the price tag for this year's deployment as being \$521 million.

On Wednesday, top Republicans on both the Senate and House Armed Services Committees [turned down](#) a proposal for a full-time National Guard quick-reaction force in the nation's capital. "We firmly oppose creating a DC National Guard quick reaction force," Senate Armed Services Committee ranking member Jim Inhofe (R-OK) and House Armed Services Committee ranking member Mike Rogers, (R-AL) said in a joint statement, adding that any security improvements to the Capitol building and surrounding congressional offices would need to fall under civilian law enforcement officials, not military ones.

According to [The Hill](#), the Department of Homeland Security has indicated that it wants the Pentagon to extend the deployment of about [4,000 National Guard](#) troops working along the US-Mexico border past September 30.

Currently, National Guard members serve one weekend a month and are otherwise deployed when needed. Guard members have full-time civilian jobs and don't receive a child care benefit during their duty, unlike active-duty troops.

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US Approach to Denuclearizing N. Korea Will Not Include 'Grand Bargain' - Senior Official

WASHINGTON, May 19 (Sputnik) - The US approach to North Korean denuclearization will not be based on a grand bargain or strategic patience but will explore diplomacy, a senior administration official told reporters.

"Our [US] goals remain the complete denuclearization of the Korean peninsula with a clear understanding that the efforts of past administrations have not achieved this objective. Our policy will not focus on shaping a grand bargain, nor will it rely on strategic patience," the official said.

The administration official also said US policy toward North Korea will explore diplomacy in order to increase the security of the United States, its allies and deployed forces while the process of denuclearization will likely be challenging.

In April, the White House said it had concluded a months-long review of its policy toward North Korea. At the same time, the US said that it will continue to engage in negotiations with Pyongyang with the aim to completely denuclearize the Korean Peninsula.

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Blinken, Lavrov Discuss Cooperation on Afghanistan, Strategic Stability, Iran, N. Korea

WASHINGTON, May 19 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov during their first in-person meeting on the margins of the Arctic Council discussed the prospects of bilateral cooperation on global issues of mutual interest such as Afghanistan, strategic stability, Iran and North Korea, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a press release.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken met today with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on the margins of the Arctic Council Ministerial... They also discussed areas in which both of our peoples could benefit from sustained and enhanced cooperation, including Afghanistan, strategic stability, and curbing Iran and DPRK's [North Korea's] nuclear programs," Price said on Wednesday.

The top diplomats also discussed ensuring humanitarian access for the people in Syria and finding a long-term solution to end the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Price said. Blinken raised US concerns over the recent deployment of Russian troops near Ukraine's eastern border, and Moscow's actions against Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty in Russia regarding the new foreign agent law, Price said. The top US diplomat also called for the release of all Americans detained in Russia, he added.

Blinken and Lavrov agreed to continue discussions going forward, Price said.

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Blinken, Lavrov Discussed Finding Solution to Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 19 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov during their first in-person meeting on the sidelines of the Arctic Council ministerial discussed finding a long-term solution to end the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a press release.

"The Secretary underscored the imperative of ensuring humanitarian access for the people of Syria, while they also discussed regional issues, including finding a long-term political solution to the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan," Price said on Wednesday.

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Blinken Expressed US Concerns to Lavrov Over Deployments Near Ukraine - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 19 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in his first in-person meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on the sidelines of the Arctic Council ministerial discussed US concerns over the recent deployment of Russian troops near Ukraine's eastern border, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a press release.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken met today with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on the margins of the Arctic Council Ministerial... Secretary Blinken raised our deep concerns regarding Russia's continued military deployments in and near Ukraine," Price said on Wednesday.

Blinken also raised concerns over Moscow's actions against Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty in Russia regarding the new foreign agent law. The top US diplomat also called for the release of all Americans detained in Russia.

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Blinken, Lavrov Discuss Cooperation on Afghanistan, Strategic Stability, Iran, N. Korea

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US House Passes Bill to Establish Commission on January 6th Capitol Riot

WASHINGTON, May 19 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives passed legislation (H.R.3233) to establish a special commission to investigate the January 6 incident at the Capitol complex in a 252-175 vote mostly along party lines.

"This bill establishes in the legislative branch the National Commission to Investigate the January 6 Attack on the United States Capitol complex," the official summary of the measure said on Wednesday evening.

If passed by the Senate and signed into law, the commission would conduct an investigation of the incident at the Capitol; identify, review, and evaluate the causes of and the lessons learned from this attack; and submit reports containing recommendations on how to improve the detection, prevention and response to violence and domestic terrorism at the US Capitol Complex.

Earlier on Wednesday, US Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell said he does not support the measure as did House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy. This statement caused US Capitol Police to submit a letter to the Congress that expressed their disappointment in congressional Republicans' stance on the measure.

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US Capitol Police Says Disappointed in Republicans Rejecting January 6 Commission Probe

WASHINGTON, May 19 (Sputnik) - The US Capitol Police (USCP) sent a letter to members of Congress in which it expressed disappointment with the Republican lawmakers who stand in opposition to the proposal to form a September 11-style commission to investigate the January 6 riot incident on the Capitol grounds.

"We, members of the United States Capitol Police, write this letter to express our profound disappointment with the recent comments from both chambers' minority leaders expressing no need for a January 6th commission," the letter said on Wednesday.

The USCP said in the letter that it is inconceivable how some lawmakers downplay the events of January 6 and can do so at present only because officers protected them on that day.

Earlier on Wednesday, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell said he opposes forming a September 11-style commission to investigate the January 6 incident. House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy similarly voiced opposition to such a move.

On January 6, a group of Trump supporters entered the Capitol in an effort to protest lawmakers formalizing the results of the 2020 presidential election that former President Donald Trump claimed was stolen. US authorities have investigated more than 170 cases connected to the incident so far.

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**US Lawmakers Introduce Measure to Block \$735Mln Sale of Missiles to Israel -
Congresswoman**

WASHINGTON, May 19 (Sputnik) - Democrat lawmakers in the US House of Representatives introduced a joint resolution to block the Biden administration's \$735 million sale of precision-guided missiles to Israel as the country continues to battle the Palestinian Hamas movement, Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's office said in a press release.

"Representatives Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Mark Pocan, and Rashida Tlaib led the introduction of a House resolution opposing the sale of \$735 million in American-made weapons to the Israeli government," the release said on Wednesday.

The releases said the Joint Direct Attack Munitions being sold to Israel are believed to be used in the ongoing violence that has already claimed the lives of more than 200 Palestinians and ten Israelis, including at least 58 children.

The White House officially notified Congress of the proposed sale on May 5, just a week before violence between Israel and Hamas escalated. US federal law requires the administration to inform Congress of such sales. Lawmakers have 15 days after the formal notification to stop the transaction.

President Joe Biden in a phone call with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Wednesday said he expects significant de-escalation in the ongoing conflict. However, Netanyahu said he is determined to continue Israel's operation in Gaza until calm is restored.

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Blinken Confirms US to Waive Sanctions on Nord Stream 2 AG, Corporate Officers

WASHINGTON, May 19 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said he has determined it is in the national interest of the United States to waive sanctions against the company, its CEO and senior officers in charge of the construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline.

"Furthermore, I have determined that it is in the national interest of the United States to waive the application of sanctions on Nord Stream 2 AG, its CEO Matthias Warnig, and Nord Stream 2 AG's corporate officers," Blinken said.

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US Identifies 4 Entities, 4 Vessels Subject to Nord Stream 2 Sanctions - Congress Report

WASHINGTON, May 19 (Sputnik) - The United States has identified four entities and four vessels subject to sanctions for engaging in construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, the US State Department said in a report to Congress.

The vessels Yury Topchev, Vladislav Strizhov, Baltiyskiy Issledovatel and Akademik Cherskiy are subject to sanctions for laying pipelines for the construction of the Nord Stream 2 or TurkStream pipeline projects, according to the report.

The report also said Russia's LLC Koksokhimtrans, LLC Mortransservice, Federal State Budgetary Institution Marine Rescue Service and the Samara Heat and Energy Property Fund are subject to sanctions for their involvement in the construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline.

The report confirmed the company leading the construction pipeline between Russia and Germany, Nord Stream 2 AG, and its CEO Matthias Warnig are subject to sanctions. However, the top Democrat on the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee Bob Menendez revealed earlier that the Biden administration waived sanctions on the company and on Warnig.

The report noted that the German government remains fully committed to completing the pipeline project because it insists it is both a necessary and a commercial undertaking as well as rejects US sanctions as being an intervention in the Germany's internal affairs.

In addition, the report said the European Union and many of its members states continue to oppose US sanctions against Nord Stream 2 because such actions are viewed as violation of German and EU sovereignty. However, Ukraine, and Central and Eastern European countries continue to urge the United States to oppose the pipeline project, but not all support the use of sanctions on European entities or individuals.

The Nord Stream 2 pipeline is designed to deliver natural gas from Russia to Europe through the Baltic Sea. This decision to waive sanctions comes in the late stages of the pipeline construction as 95 percent of the project has already being completed.

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US Allies, Foes Alike Criticize Biden for Nord Stream 2 Sanctions Waivers

WASHINGTON, May 19 (Sputnik) - Scores of US lawmakers, Democrats and Republicans alike, lashed out at President Joe Biden for his decision to waive sanctions against the company in charge of the construction of Russia's Nord Stream 2 pipeline exporting gas to Europe.

Despite pledging to stop the project from being completed, the Biden administration notified Congress that it spared the Nord Stream 2 AG company and its CEO Matthias Warnig citing "US national interest" as the reason.

US Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Bob Menendez issued a statement urging the Biden administration to lift the waivers and move forward with the congressionally mandated sanctions.

"The administration has said that the pipeline is a bad idea and it is a Russian malign influence project," Menendez said. "I share this sentiment, but fail to see how today's decision will advance US efforts to counter Russian aggression in Europe."

Menendez confirmed that Congress received a mandatory report from the State Department with a notification of waivers for Nord Stream 2 AG and Warnig.

Senate Foreign Relations Committee member Jeanne Shaheen said she is encouraged that the State Department will levy sanctions against eight additional entities, but is disappointed the Biden administration will not hold Nord Stream 2 AG to the same standard.

"Completion of this pipeline poses a threat to US security interests and the stability of our partners in the region," Shaheen said.

Senator Tom Cotton said via Twitter that "Nord Stream 2 should be left incomplete to rust in the Baltic- not rescued by an American president."

Earlier in the day, Congressman August Pfluger called for a bipartisan action to contain the damage done to the campaign against Nord Stream 2.

"Allowing Nord Stream 2 to be built would only tighten Vladimir Putin's stranglehold on Europe's energy supply and threaten the security of the United States and our allies abroad. Republicans and Democrats alike must recognize this risk and act immediately," Pfluger said via Twitter.

Other critics pointed out that Biden also decided to shut down the Keystone XL pipeline meant to connect Canadian oil fields with refineries and tank farms in the United States.

Congresswoman Debbie Lesko said via Twitter the Biden administration is planning on waiving sanctions on a "Putin ally" building the pipeline after it shut down the Keystone XL Pipeline in the United States.

This is the real Russian collusion that threatens our global and national security," Lesko said.

Congressman Matt Rosendale echoed that sentiment noting that Biden revoked the permit for the Keystone XL pipeline on his very first day in office.

"Now he's waving sanctions allowing Russia's Nord Stream 2 pipeline to continue construction. Another 'America last' decision from the President," Rosendale said.

Corporate US media joined the criticism of the Biden administration's decision, including The Wall Street Journal that published an editorial saying the pipeline will provide cheap energy, but deepen European dependence on Russian gas.

"This is geopolitical malpractice given the threat posed by Moscow's revisionist foreign policy. It's also an economic reward to Mr. Putin," the editorial said.

Nord Stream 2 is a joint venture of Russian energy company Gazprom and five European partners. It aims to construct a twin pipeline that will deliver up to 2 trillion cubic feet of Russian gas to Germany annually under the Baltic Sea. The project is a constant target of criticism and sanctions by the US, which calls it a threat to the energy security of Europe and Ukraine. Russia has described the pipeline as a purely commercial project and stressed that it will be completed.

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Blinken Urges Cooperation With Russia to Build 'Safer, More Secure' World

WASHINGTON, May 19 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov on the margins of the Arctic Council Ministerial meeting in Iceland and expressed his desire to see the United States and Russia cooperate where possible in the hope of achieving a safer and more secure world.

"There are many areas where our interests intersect and overlap, and we believe that we can work together and indeed build on those interests, whether it is dealing with COVID-19 and the pandemic, combating climate change, dealing with the nuclear programs of Iran and North Korea, Afghanistan, there are many areas of intersecting interests," Blinken said. "It's our view if the leaders of Russia and the United States can work together cooperatively, our people, the world, can be a safer and more secure place, and that's what we seek."

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US Identifies 4 Entities, 4 Vessels Subject to Nord Stream 2 Sanctions - Congress Report

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The report also said Russia's LLC Koksokhimtrans, LLC Mortransservice, Federal State Budgetary Institution Marine Rescue Service and the Samara Heat and Energy Property Fund are subject to sanctions for their involvement in the construction of the Nord Stream 2 project.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, May 19 (Sputnik)

IRAN NUCLEAR AGREEMENT

* The participants in the Iran nuclear agreement proceed from the fact that the United States will return to the accord, Russian Permanent Representative to International Organizations in Vienna Mikhail Ulyanov said.

* The participants in the Iran nuclear deal have entered a qualitatively different stage of negotiations, there is no need to set a deadline for their completion, Ulyanov said.

* The extension of the technical agreement on International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspections in Iran will contribute to the success of negotiations on the restoration of the Iran nuclear deal, Ulyanov said.

MIDDLE EAST TENSIONS

- * US President Joe Biden in a phone call with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said he expects significant de-escalation in the ongoing violent conflict with Palestine, the White House said.
- * The Israeli air force has responded to four rockets fired toward Israel from Lebanon, the Israel Defense Forces said.
- * The evacuation of Russian citizens from the Gaza Strip is being worked out, the Russian diplomatic mission in Palestine told Sputnik.
- * The settlements between Qana and Siddikine in a Tyre suburb in southern Lebanon were stricken by Israeli artillery, Lebanese broadcaster Al Mayadeen reported.

NORD STREAM 2

- * The Biden administration will use all available tools to try and prevent the completion of Russia's Nord Stream 2 gas-exporting pipeline, US State Department Principal Deputy Spokesperson Jalina Porter told reporters on Wednesday.
- * The Biden administration is waiving new sanctions it imposed on companies constructing the Nord Stream 2 pipeline due to national security reasons, Bloomberg reported citing people familiar with the matter.
- * The United States considers Nord Stream 2 as a "bad deal," White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre told reporters on Wednesday, when asked to confirm sanctions waiver.
- * Germany will discuss with its US partners the most problematic aspects of the Nord Stream 2 project, including in connection with Ukraine, Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said.
- * Lawmakers on the US House Foreign Affairs Committee agreed to work on a separate measure to impose sanctions on vessels and entities involved in the completion of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline after advancing by voice vote a bill on the non-recognition of Crimea rejoining Russia.

ARMENIA-AZERBAIJAN DISPUTE

- * Russian President Vladimir Putin in emphasized during a telephone conversation with Armenia's Acting Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan that Russia would continue to contribute to the normalization of the situation on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border, the Kremlin said on Wednesday.
- * Pashinyan discussed with Putin the situation on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border, the Armenian government said.
- * Putin and his Azerbaijani counterpart, Ilham Aliyev, discussed Nagorno-Karabakh with an emphasis on solving practical security problems, the Kremlin said.

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PREVIEW - Turkish, Pakistani, Palestinian Top Diplomats to Address UNGA Session on Gaza Thursday

UNITED NATIONS, May 19 (Sputnik) - The UN General Assembly on May 20 will convene a special in-person session - the first since the start of the coronavirus pandemic - to discuss the ongoing escalation in the Gaza Strip.

The meeting will be held in a so-called hybrid format after some top diplomats decided to address the General Assembly in person. Pakistan Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi has already departed for New York as have his Turkish and Palestinian counterparts, Mevlut Cavusoglu and Riad Malki.

"On our way to New York together [with] my brothers Riad Malki of Palestine and Shah Mahmood Qureshi of Pakistan!" Cavusoglu said in a Twitter post accompanied by a photograph where the three officials can be seen boarding a plane for the General Assembly session.

"In the UN General Assembly, together we will stand up against Israel's atrocities and defend our Palestinian brothers and sisters," he said.

Sudanese Foreign Minister Mariam al-Sadiq al-Mahdi will also arrive in New York to address the emergency session on Palestine.

The decision to call a meeting comes as part of international efforts to de-escalate the renewed conflict between Israel and Hamas, which has already claimed the lives of at least 219 Palestinians and 12 Israelis.

The latest episode of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict started on May 10 after civil unrest in East Jerusalem, prompting hostilities on the border of Israel and the Gaza Strip, with Palestinian militants firing thousands of rockets at Israel and the latter retaliating with airstrikes.

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US Waives Sanctions Against Nord Stream 2 AG and CEO - Senator

WASHINGTON, May 19 (Sputnik) — The Biden administration is waiving sanctions against the company leading the construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline between Russia and Germany, Senator Bob Menendez said on Wednesday.

"Citing US national security interests, the Biden Administration announced it would waive mandatory sanctions on the company Nord Stream 2 AG and its CEO Matthias Warnig," Menendez said after Congress received a report from the State Department on entities involved in sanctionable activities over building the pipeline.

The Nord Stream 2 pipeline is designed to deliver natural gas from Russia to Europe through the Baltic Sea. This decision to waive sanctions comes in the late stages of the pipeline's construction, with 95% of the project already completed.

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US Seizes 4,500 Counterfeit Facemasks From China - Customs Agency

WASHINGTON, May 19 (Sputnik) - The US authorities impounded more than 4,000 counterfeit designer facemasks from China in a shipment bound for Puerto Rico, the Customs and Border Protection (CPB) agency said on Thursday.

"Officers found 4,550 counterfeit medical face masks from fashion designers such as Dior (1,150), Louis Vuitton (1,100), Gucci (1,400), Burberry (400), and Fendi (500). The face masks were reviewed by an import specialist who determined the items were counterfeit," a CPB press release said.

Customs inspectors in the state of Ohio intercepted the shipment bound for Puerto Rico. If the items were real, retail prices would have totaled more than \$1.36 million, the release said. Officials seized more than 12.7 million counterfeit face masks, nearly 180,000 coronavirus test kits not approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), more than 38,000 FDA-prohibited chloroquine tablets and thousands of other illicit and potentially unsafe medical and sanitary products in 2020, the release added.

Most of the products originated in China, according to the release.

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US Congratulates China on First Zhurong Mars Rover Photos – NASA Administrator

WASHINGTON, May 19 (Sputnik) – China's Zhurong Mars Rover will advance the human race's knowledge of the Red Planet with its discoveries, National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) Administrator Bill Nelson said in a congratulatory on Wednesday after the China National Space Administration released first photos from the mission.

"Congratulations to the China National Space Administration (CNSA) on receiving the first images from the Zhurong Mars rover!" Nelson said in a statement. "[T]he United States and the world look forward to the discoveries Zhurong will make to advance humanity's knowledge of the Red Planet."

Nelson said he looked forward to future international discoveries that would help inform and develop the capabilities needed to land human explorers on Mars.

CNSA's successful landing of the Zhurong rover last week made it only the second nation to ever land successfully on Mars, Nelson acknowledged.

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Korean War Veteran Receives Medal of Honor For Bravery 70 Years Ago – White House

WASHINGTON, May 19 (Sputnik) – President Joe Biden will award the Congressional Medal of Honor, the highest US military decoration, to retired Army Colonel Ralph Puckett on Friday for acts of bravery carried out against Chinese attacks more than 70 years ago during the Korean War, the White House said on Wednesday.

"On May 21, President Joseph Biden will award the Medal of Honor to Colonel Ralph Puckett, Jr., United States Army, Retired, for conspicuous gallantry during the Korean War," the White House said in a press release. "President Moon Jae-in of the Republic of Korea will join this ceremony."

Colonel Puckett, now 94, distinguished himself while serving as commander of the 8th U.S. Army Ranger Company during November 25-26, 1950 while serving in Korea, the White House said.

During the retreat, Puckett was wounded by a hand grenade in the first attack but kept at his post. He is also credited with ordering "danger close" artillery strikes near his own position to blunt the Chinese soldiers' advances.

He went on to also serve in the Vietnam War and mentor future generations of army soldiers.

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US on French UNSC Draft on Gaza: We Will Not Support Steps Undermining De-Escalation

UNITED NATIONS, May 19 (Sputnik) - The United States will not support actions that undermine the diplomatic efforts it leads to de-escalate the conflict between Israel and Palestine, a spokesperson for the US mission at the United Nations told Sputnik on Wednesday when asked about the France-led draft resolution on Gaza.

On Tuesday, France, together with Tunisia, Egypt and Jordan prepared a draft resolution calling for a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip and humanitarian access.

"We've been clear and consistent that we are focused on intensive diplomatic efforts underway to bring an end to the violence and that we will not support actions that we believe undermine efforts to de-escalate," the spokesperson said when asked whether the United Nations will support the resolution.

If blocked, the draft resolution would become a fourth failed attempt of the UN Security Council to speak in one voice against the hostilities in the Middle East.

According to diplomats at the United Nations, all previous attempts to issue a statement on the renewed conflict were also blocked by Washington.

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Blinken Meets With Swedish Counterpart, Discusses Russia Ahead of Arctic Council

WASHINGTON, May 19 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with his Swedish counterpart, Ann Linde, in Iceland's capital city of Reykjavik ahead where they discussed mutual concern over Russian activity around Ukraine among other issues, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Wednesday.

"Secretary Blinken and Foreign Minister Linde also discussed... mutual concerns over Russia's actions in and around Ukraine," Price said.

The mutual concern of the two leaders is in regards to the recent buildup of Russian forces near the Ukrainian border, which has remained a point of tension between the nations. The US and its allies have expressed their discontent with the military buildup, while Russian officials have stated that they are reacting to NATO buildup in the region.

Russia is set to assume the presidency of the Arctic Council – an organization of countries near the Arctic that work to develop and protect the polar region – for the next two years as Iceland vacates the role.

Blinken also met with another Scandinavian counterpart, Norwegian Minister for Foreign Affairs Ine Marie Eriksen Sørreide on the margins of the ministerial. The two leaders discussed the ongoing violence between Israelis and Palestinians, collaboration in combating the COVID-19 pandemic, and ongoing efforts to achieve peace in Afghanistan.

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US House Foreign Affairs Advances Bill on Non-Recognition of Crimea Joining Russia

WASHINGTON, May 19 (Sputnik) - The US House Foreign Affairs Committee by voice vote on Wednesday advanced a bill on the non-recognition of Crimea becoming part of the Russian Federation.

"We must speak with one voice on what [Russian President Vladimir] Putin has done in the incursion of sovereign territory in 21st century Europe," Democrat Congressman Gerry Connolly said during a committee markup hearing.

The bill will head to the House floor for consideration. The measure would prohibit any US federal agency from taking any action that implies the recognition of Russia's sovereignty over Crimea.

On March 16, 2014, Crimea rejoined Russia after over 95 percent of voters backed the move in a referendum, which followed a violent change in leadership in Ukraine. Two days later, an agreement on Crimea's accession to the Russian Federation was signed. Since 2015, March 18 is an official holiday on the peninsula.

The majority of Western countries and Ukraine refuse to recognize the results of the referendum and have imposed sanctions on Russia. Moscow insists that the referendum was conducted in compliance with international law and democratic procedures. According to Russian President Vladimir Putin, the issue of the peninsula's territorial belonging is "historically closed."

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US Lawmakers Agree to Push New Legislation to Sanction Nord Stream 2 Pipeline

WASHINGTON, May 19 (Sputnik) - Lawmakers in the US House Foreign Affairs Committee on Wednesday agreed to work on legislation to impose sanctions on vessels and entities involved in the completion of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline.

"I do look forward to working together on this, it is a very important issue," Republican Congressman August Pfluge said. "If it takes us all day, then I'd like us to spend all day on it or multiple days on this very important issue."

Pfluger made the comment while trying to introduce an amendment to the Crimea Annexation Non-Recognition Act that would impose sanctions on vessels and entities engaged in the construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline. The congressman explained the potential sanctions would be imposed under the Protecting Europe's Energy Security Act.

Pfluger said the completion of Nord Stream 2 pipeline would tighten Russia's grip on Europe's energy supply and present a security threat to the United States and its allies.

However, Congressman Gerry Connolly convinced him to withdraw the amendment to prevent "diluting" the intent of the Crimea Annexation Non-Recognition Act. Connolly said he agreed with Pfluger's concerns and offered to work with him to find another route to advance the amendment.

Earlier on Wednesday, Bloomberg reported that the Biden administration has waived sanctions on the Switzerland-based company Nord Stream 2 AG due to national security reasons.

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UNRWA Launches Emergency Appeal Seeking \$38Mln to Aid Gaza - UN Spokesman
UNITED NATIONS, May 19 (Sputnik) - The UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) on Wednesday launched an emergency appeal for \$38 million to provide emergency aid to families affected by the ongoing hostilities in the Gaza Strip, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing.

"In a Flash Appeal, the UN Relief and Works Agency, UNRWA, said today that it urgently seeks \$38 million to respond to the immediate needs and to carry out essential emergency interventions in Gaza," Dujarric said.

The funding will cover UNRWA's activities for an initial 30-day period from the start of the escalation on May 10, and will support some 50,000 people seeking safety in 50 designated shelters, Dujarric said.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called on international donors to ensure adequate funding for aid operations in Gaza, the spokesman added.

On Tuesday, the United Nations announced it hoped to release an additional \$14 million from the Humanitarian Fund for the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

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US Lawmakers Ask Biden For 20,000 Visas For Afghans Working With NATO Forces

WASHINGTON, May 19 (Sputnik) – A bipartisan group of Senators asked President Joe Biden to authorize an additional 20,000 Special Immigrant Visas (SIV) for Afghans who worked with the US as American forces withdraw, according to a letter released on Wednesday.

"The authorization of at least 20,000 additional visas for fiscal year (FY) 2022 to begin to account for the individuals who are at risk of retaliation for their work in support of the U.S. mission in Afghanistan," leads a list of requests.

The letter, organized by Senators Democrat Jeanne Shaheen and Republican Joni Ernst, also urges Biden to address a backlog of SIV applications and suggests that at-risk individuals be transported to safe locations while awaiting approval.

In addition to Shaheen and Ernst, the letter was signed by Senators Patrick Leahy, Roger Wicker, Dick Durbin, Ron Johnson, Jack Reed, Mike Rounds, Robert Menendez, Cynthia Lummis, Kirsten Gillibrand, Lindsey Graham, Angus King, Dan Sullivan, Chris Van Hollen, Chris Coons, Ben Cardin, Raphael Warnock, Brian Schatz, and Tim Kaine.

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US to Use All Available Tools to Stop Nord Stream 2 Pipeline - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 19 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration will use all available tools to try and prevent the completion of Russia's Nord Stream 2 gas-exporting pipeline, US State Department Principal Deputy Spokesperson Jalina Porter told reporters.

"Broadly speaking, the administration is committed to using all available tools... to stop the Nord Stream 2 pipeline from being completed... Our goal is to reinforce European energy security as well as to safeguard against any type of predatory behavior that Russia has demonstrated in its past actions," Porter said during a briefing.

Earlier on Wednesday, Bloomberg reported that the Biden administration is waiving new sanctions that it imposed on a company constructing the Nord Stream 2 pipeline due to national security reasons.

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US to Face Gas Prices Fluctuation Ahead of Memorial Day Weekend - AAA

WASHINGTON, May 19 (Sputnik) – Motorists in the US East Coast may face another week of "some fluctuation" in gas prices initially caused by the cyberattack against the Colonial Pipeline, as the country heads into a long Memorial Day weekend in late May, American Automobile Association (AAA) spokesperson Janette McGee told Sputnik on Wednesday.

"The stabilization as stations are re-fueled is positive, but we do expect some fluctuation in the lead up to Memorial Day weekend next week," McGee said.

When the Colonial Pipeline went offline on May 7 due to a cyberattack, the national average price was \$2.95 per gallon, she added.

"Since then it has jumped to \$3.04. However, it has held steady at this price point since this past Saturday [May 15]," she noted.

The national average jumped eight cents during this past week, but states like Georgia, North Carolina and South Carolina faced prices jump of up to 21 cents, AAA said in a separate statement.

The AAA estimates that some 34 million Americans will travel during Memorial Day weekend from May 27 to May 31. That is a 52 percent increase compared to last summer, but nearly 9 percent below pre-pandemic levels in 2019.

A ransomware attack prompted Colonial Pipeline to shut down operations on May 7 with the system not resuming normal operations until May 15.

The pipeline, stretching more than 5,000 miles from refineries on the Gulf of Mexico coast, supplies nearly half the gasoline on the US East Coast, along with jet fuel and heating oil. Short supplies combined with panic buying caused many stations to run out of gas.

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Some 12 Foreign Ministers to Take Part in UN General Assembly Hearing on Palestine, Israel
WASHINGTON, May 19 (Sputnik) – About a dozen foreign ministers will take part in the United Nations (UN) General Assembly hearing on the Israeli-Palestine conflict which is scheduled for Thursday, the Spokesperson for the President of the General Assembly, Brenden Varma, said on Wednesday.

"I can tell you that we're expecting around a dozen ministers, I don't have names to share at this point," Brenden said during a briefing.

It is going to be the first in-person meeting at the ministerial level since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic last year.

Earlier on Wednesday, US President Joe Biden in a phone call with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said he expects significant de-escalation in the ongoing violent conflict with Palestine later in the day. However, Netanyahu said he is determined to continue Israel's operation in Gaza until calm is restored.

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Fauci Says He Hopes Mask Mandates to Be Eliminated From US Domestic Flights Within Months

WASHINGTON, May 19 (Sputnik) - US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Anthony Fauci on Wednesday expressed hope that the masking requirements aboard domestic

flights would be dropped within the next few months as more individuals get vaccinated against COVID-19.

Last week, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) updated its COVID-19 guidance for fully vaccinated people, saying they can participate in indoor and outdoor activities of any size without wearing a face mask.

"I hope that we get enough people vaccinated that, at least, on domestic flights that would be a matter of months," Fauci said during a virtual discussion hosted by Axios, responding to a question about the elimination of masking requirements on planes.

Fauci, however, noted that masking requirements aboard international flights remains a more complicated issue, with vaccination timelines varied across the world and uncertainty surrounding the implementation of vaccine passports.

The Biden administration has set a goal of fully vaccination 70 percent of the adult population by July 4. Fauci has described the goal as attainable, but warned of a resurgent pandemic should the vaccination drive stall.

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COVID-19 Vaccine Producer to Take Corrective Action After Millions of Doses Lost - CEO

WASHINGTON, May 19 (Sputnik) - Emergent BioSolutions, a company that received a \$628 million government contract to assist in the production of COVID-19 vaccines, will be taking corrective action following the contamination and subsequent destruction of 15 million doses, CEO Robert G. Kramer told the House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis on Wednesday.

The company is currently under investigation by House officials after failing to provide a single usable vaccine to the public yet, primarily because of the contaminated batch made in their Bayview facility. Kramer stressed, however, that the company does have 100 million doses of the J&J vaccine currently awaiting FDA approval.

"We have implemented an array of corrective steps. Critically, we've removed the AstraZeneca vaccine candidate from Bayview, which is now dedicated only to the J&J vaccine," Kramer said. During the same hearing, Kramer and other company executives came under fire for allegations of insider trading, general incompetence, and questions about whether they fairly received the government contract, considering the company's links to Dr. Robert Kadlec, who worked with the company prior to his role as an advisor in the Trump administration.

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Fauci Warns of 'Danger' Americans May Misinterpret Updated Masking Guidance

WASHINGTON, May 19 (Sputnik) - US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Director Anthony Fauci on Wednesday warned of the danger of Americans misinterpreting the updated masking guidelines.

Last week, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) updated its guidance for fully vaccinated people, allowing indoor and outdoor activities of any size without wearing a face mask.

"I think there is a danger [of individuals overinterpreting the guidance]," Fauci said during a virtual discussion hosted by the news website Axios. "I think people are misinterpreting, thinking that this is a removal of a mask mandate for everyone, it's not. It's an assurance to those, who are vaccinated, that they can feel safe, be it outdoors or indoors."

Fauci emphasized those who have not received the coronavirus injections should continue to adhere to masking guidelines and encouraged Americans to get vaccinated as soon as possible.

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US Waives Nord Stream 2 Related Sanctions Due to National Security Reasons - Reports

WASHINGTON, May 19 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is waiving new sanctions it imposed on a company constructing the Nord Stream 2 pipeline due to national security reasons, Bloomberg reported on Wednesday citing people familiar with the matter.

The report added that the State Department in a report to Congress said Nord Stream 2 AG is involved in sanctionable activity under US law, but the US administration has decided to waive the sanctions for national security reasons.

Sanctions on Russian ships laying the pipes are expected to remain.

Axios reported on Tuesday that the Biden administration was expected to waive sanctions against Nord Stream 2 AG and its CEO, Matthias Warnig, using US national interests as justification.

The United States continues to express to German leadership its opposition to the pipeline and the idea of western European countries relying on Russian energy.

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Biden Says US Must Demonstrate Leadership in Arctic as Region's Strategic Importance Grows

WASHINGTON, May 19 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden on Wednesday said that the US must demonstrate its leadership and engagement in the Arctic as the strategic importance of the region grows.

"In the Arctic... in the region rapidly growing in strategic importance, as ice recedes and new sea lands open. We, the United States, are an Arctic nation. The United States must

demonstrate our leadership and engagement, our diplomacy and our operational skill," Biden said in a speech at the US Coast Guard Academy's Commencement ceremony.

The president went on to say that upholding maritime rules was also a way to protect US national security.

The 12th Arctic Council ministerial meeting will begin on May 20 and bring together the top diplomats from Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the United States. The two-year revolving presidency of the council will transfer from Iceland to Russia.

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US-Sponsored Mediterranean Maritime Exercise Begins With Focus on Migration – AFRICOM

WASHINGTON, May 19 (Sputnik) - Maritime forces from 13 nations launched the 16th annual US-sponsored Phoenix Express exercises, with a focus on combatting irregular migration and trafficking in drugs and other illegal material, US Africa Command (AFRICOM) said on Wednesday.

"This year's exercise control group is hosted by Tunisia with training taking place throughout the Mediterranean Sea, to include territorial waters of participating North African nations. The at-sea portion of the exercise will test North African, European, and US maritime forces' abilities to respond to irregular migration and combat illicit trafficking and the movement of illegal goods," an AFRICOM press release said.

Phoenix Express, sponsored by AFRICOM and facilitated by US Naval Forces Africa (NAVAF), is designed to improve regional cooperation, increase maritime domain awareness, information-sharing practices, and operational capabilities to promote safety and security in the Mediterranean, the release added.

The thirteen nations scheduled to participate are Algeria, Belgium, Egypt, France, Greece, Italy, Libya, Malta, Mauritania, Morocco, Spain, Tunisia, and the United States, according to the release.

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Biden Says China, Russia Disrupt International Maritime Rules

WASHINGTON, May 19 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said on Wednesday that China and Russia increasingly challenge the established maritime principles, including freedom of navigation and trade.

"For decades those rules [of maritime security and openness] supported global economic strength that benefited nations everywhere, and helped people around the world to develop their economic potential," Biden said in speech at the US Coast Guard Academy's Commencement ceremony. "But increasingly, we are seeing those rules challenged both by the rapid advance of technology and the disruptive actions of nations like China and Russia, with whom I have had direct discussions of this with President Xi [Jinping] as well as President [Vladimir] Putin."

Biden noted that the long-standing basic maritime principles like freedom of navigation are bedrock of the global economic and global security.

The US president pointed out that international areas of trade and shipping should remain peaceful whether that is the South China Sea, Arabian Gulf and increasingly the Arctic while it is a vital interest of US foreign policy to secure unimpeded flow of the global commerce.

Biden emphasized that the United States has to play an active role in setting the rules of conduct based on democratic values and will continue to support the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas.

In 2020, the United States operationally challenged 28 different excessive maritime claims by 19 different nations, the Defense Department said in a recent report.

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Trump Vows to Overcome Latest 'Unfair Attack' By New York Criminal Probe - Statement

WASHINGTON, May 19 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump on Monday vowed to overcome a criminal probe being launched into his business empire by the New York State Attorney General.

"[T]hey failed to stop me in Washington, so they turned it over to New York to do their dirty work," Trump said in a statement issued on Telegram. "This is what I have been going through for years. It's a very sad and dangerous tale for our country, but it is what it is, and we will overcome together."

Trump said the latest attempt to prosecute him was behavior typical of a failed third world state and not of the United States.

"This is something that happens in failed third world countries, not the United States. If you can run for a prosecutor's office pledging to take out your enemies, and be elected to that job by

partisan voters who wish to enact political retribution, then we are no longer a free constitutional democracy," Trump said.

On Tuesday, the New York Attorney General's office said it was conducting a criminal investigation into Trump's business empire, expanding what had previously been a civil probe.

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US Lawmakers Crafting Measure to Block \$735Mln Sale of Missiles to Israel - Reports

WASHINGTON, May 19 (Sputnik) - A group of Democrat lawmakers are crafting a resolution that would block the Biden administration's proposed \$735 million sale of precision-guided missiles to Israel as deadly violence continues with the Palestinian Hamas movement in Gaza, Politico reported on Wednesday citing a draft resolution it obtained.

The draft resolution is expected to be introduced later on Wednesday, the report said.

US Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is leading the effort with backing from her colleagues Rashida Tlaib, Ilhan Omar and Mark Pocan, among others, the report added.

The White House officially notified Congress of the proposed sale on May 5, just a week before violence between Israel and Hamas escalated. US federal law requires the administration to inform Congress of such sales. Lawmakers have 20 days after the formal notification to stop the transaction.

President Joe Biden in a phone call with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Wednesday said he expects significant de-escalation in the ongoing conflict. However, Netanyahu said he is determined to continue Israel's operation in Gaza until calm is restored.

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McConnell Says Opposes Democrat-Backed Probe of January 6 Riot at US Capitol

WASHINGTON, May 19 (Sputnik) - US Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell said on Wednesday that he opposes legislation to create a September 11-style commission to probe the January 6 incident at the Capitol just as the House of Representatives is readying to vote on the measure later on Wednesday.

"After careful consideration, I've made the decision to oppose the House Democrats slanted and unbalanced proposal for another commission to study the events of January 6," McConnell said on the Senate floor as quoted by The Hill.

The legislation would create a bipartisan commission with an equal number of Democrats and Republicans, a formula modeled on the commission that probed the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on Washington and New York.

With McConnell's opposition, the legislation faces difficulty obtaining the ten Republican votes in the Senate needed for the measure to become law.

The House of Representatives is expected to vote on the measure later on Wednesday. Earlier in the week, US House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy also announced his opposition to creating a September 11-style commission. However, Republicans in the House have little leverage to prevent the passage of the measure should the Democrat-controlled chamber go ahead with the vote.

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Key Republican Senators Seek Increase in US Defense Spending to Prevent Chinese Hegemony

WASHINGTON, May 19 (Sputnik) - Senators Jim Inhofe and Richard Shelby - the ranking Republican on the Armed Services Committee and the Vice Chairman of the Appropriations Committee - said on Wednesday that they seek to ensure increases in US military spending under the Biden administration in order to prevent China from attaining global hegemony. "China is our nation's top threat, and the Chinese Communist Party is investing in the People's Liberation Army at record rates," Inhofe and Shelby said in a press release. "In our efforts to counter China's quest for global hegemony, it would be shortsighted to ramp up our domestic investments in technology without also increasing defense spending and leveraging our expansive defense research and development enterprise."

The senators introduced an amendment to the US Innovation and Competitiveness Act, which would provide dollar-for-dollar parity between increases in defense spending and non-defense spending, the release said.

President Joe Biden's 2022 defense budget proposal asks Congress to approve \$753 billion in spending for the Defense Department and other national security programs. Meanwhile, Biden has proposed raising corporate taxes from the current 21 percent to 28 percent to fund a \$2.3 trillion infrastructure program.

The 2021 defense policy bill authorized during the Trump-era provided \$740.5 billion for the Defense Department and other national security tasks. However, ranking member of the House Armed Services Seapower and Projection Forces Subcommittee said Biden's budget should be at least about \$763 billion due to inflation.

The White House previously said \$715 billion in the Biden administration's total 2022 budget proposal would be allocated in baseline funding for the Defense Department with a focus on deterring China and Russia.

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US Pipeline CEO Admits Paying \$4.4M In Ransom to End Hacker Attack, Restore Service

WASHINGTON, May 19 (Sputnik) – Colonial Pipeline Chief Executive Joseph Blount said his company paid \$4.4 million to the cybercriminal group that closed the largest US pipeline with a ransomware attack that sent American motorists scrambling to find gasoline and underscored the vulnerability of the nation's infrastructure to hackers, the Wall Street Journal reported on Monday.

In an interview with the newspaper, Blount acknowledged publicly for the first time that the company had paid the ransom, saying it was an option he felt he had to exercise, given the stakes involved in a shutdown of such critical energy infrastructure. The Colonial Pipeline provides roughly 45 percent of the fuel for the East Coast, according to the company. Blount said he authorized the ransom payment of \$4.4 million because executives were unsure how badly the cyberattack had breached its systems or how long it would take to bring the pipeline back.

Blount said he reluctantly authorized the payment on May 7 after receiving the conditions from the cybercriminal outfit known as DarkSide.

Gas stations along the US East Coast ran out of fuel with lingering disruptions continuing a week after the pipeline reopened on May 12.

DarkSide has turned ransomware into a profitable business, netting more than \$90 million from 99 organizations infected with the group's malware, the cyber monitoring group Elliptic said in a report on Tuesday.

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US, Canadian Top Diplomats Discuss Ukraine, Israel-Palestine Conflict – Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, May 19 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Canadian Foreign Minister Marc Garneau discussed the civil conflict in Ukraine as well as the ongoing hostilities between Israel and the Gaza Strip, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Wednesday.

"[Blinken and Garneau] spoke about ending arbitrary detentions in state-to-state relations and the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine," Price said in a statement following the meeting on the sidelines of the Arctic Council Ministerial. "Finally, they discussed ongoing intensive efforts to bring an end to the violence in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza."

The top diplomats of their respective countries also discussed the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, climate change and "upholding the rules-based international order."

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US Confirms Removal of Sudan From Terrorism Sanctions List – Treasury Department

WASHINGTON, May 19 (Sputnik) – The US government has confirmed it is removing Sudan from the list of nations designated as supporting terrorism, the Department of the Treasury announced on Wednesday.

"The Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) is amending the Terrorism List Governments Sanctions Regulations... to implement the rescission of the designation of Sudan as a State Sponsor of Terrorism," the department said.

The United States has received a payment of more than \$300 million from Sudan to compensate victims of attacks on two American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 and the USS Cole in 2000 as well as the killing of US Agency for International Development (USAID) employee John Granville in 1998, Secretary of State Anthony Blinken said on March 31. Blinken then thanked Sudan for its efforts over the past two years to resolve outstanding compensation claims

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Probe Finds Trump Admin Official Took Money From Company That Botched COVID-19 Vaccines

WASHINGTON, May 19 (Sputnik) - A senior Trump administration official who had previously received hundreds of thousands of dollars in consulting fees from Emergent BioSolutions, awarded the company a huge coronavirus vaccine contract that it later bungled and had to scrap 15 million doses because of contamination, documents released by a congressional probe said on Wednesday.

"Dr. Robert Kadlec - a former consultant to Emergent who later became a senior Trump administration official - received at least \$360,000 in consulting fees from Emergent prior to joining HHS and awarding Emergent billions of dollars in contracts," the US House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis said.

The documents were released in advance of a congressional hearing on the issue. The US government gave Emergent a \$628 million contract to produce the vaccine in 2020 and has already paid it \$271 million, the documents said.

Production at Emergent's facility in Baltimore, Maryland, was shut down in April after workers accidentally contaminated a batch of Johnson & Johnson vaccine requiring the destruction of 15 million doses. The documents include a series of confidential audits recording repeated violations of manufacturing standards at the plant, including failure to properly disinfect it.

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US Health Agency Projects COVID-19 Deaths Will Continue to Decrease Over Coming 4 Weeks

WASHINGTON, May 19 (Sputnik) – The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on Wednesday projected that the COVID-19 death rate will continue to decrease over the next four weeks and estimated that the final number of fatalities will not exceed 604,000 in total.

"This week's national ensemble predicts that the number of newly reported COVID-19 deaths will likely decrease over the next 4 weeks, with 1,200 to 4,600 new deaths likely reported in the week ending June 12, 2021. The national ensemble predicts that a total of 594,000 to 604,000 COVID-19 deaths will be reported by this date," CDC said in a release.

On Monday, US President Joe Biden said that the number of COVID-19 deaths is down by 81 percent while new coronavirus cases decline in all 50 US states for the first time since the start of the pandemic.

As of Wednesday, a total of 583,596 COVID-19 deaths have been reported in the US, according to the data compiled by CDC.

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Senior Republicans in Congress Oppose Permanent Military Role in Protecting US Capitol

WASHINGTON, May 19 (Sputnik) – A proposed quick reaction force for the US Capitol building consisting of soldiers from the Washington, DC National Guard drew opposition from top Republicans on military oversight committees in both houses of Congress, Senator Jim Inhofe and Congressman Mike Rogers announced on Wednesday.

"The National Guard went above and beyond to protect the Capitol since January 6, but it's time they return home and focus on their core mission. Security of the Capitol Complex must remain the responsibility of federal civilian law enforcement," Inhofe and Rogers said in a press release. The DC National Guard played a key role in regaining control of the Capitol after the complex was occupied on January 6 by violent supporters of then-President Donald Trump. The melee prompted some lawmakers to propose a permanent security role for the National Guard to protect the Capitol.

However, Inhofe and Rogers said any rapid reaction force must consist entirely of civilians.

"A civilian force would improve the range of law enforcement capabilities, streamline operations beyond the Capitol, and would likely cost much less than tapping the National Guard for this purpose," the lawmakers said.

A task force that examined the January 6 also recommended the creation of a civilian – as opposed to military – rapid reaction force for the Capitol, the release said.

Inhofe and Rogers are the ranking Republicans on the Senate and House Armed Services Committees, respectively.

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US Biotech Firm Awarded Bonuses to Execs Despite COVID-19 Vaccine Contamination – Reports

WASHINGTON, May 19 (Sputnik) – Emergent BioSolutions approved hundreds of thousands of dollars in bonuses to its top executives in 2020 after its factory in Baltimore contaminated millions of Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine doses before any had yet been approved by the US government, the New York Times reported Wednesday.

The newspaper cited documents released earlier in the day by the House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis in advance of a congressional hearing on the issue. The US government gave Emergent a \$628 million contract to produce the vaccine in 2020 and has already paid it \$271 million, the documents said, according to the report.

Production at the Baltimore facility was shut down in April after workers accidentally contaminated a batch of Johnson & Johnson vaccines. The documents include a series of confidential audits previously reported by the New York Times recording repeated violations of manufacturing standards at the plant, including failure to properly disinfect it, the report said. Nevertheless, Emergent's board gave top performance ratings to its leaders, including founder and chairman, Fuad El-Hibri and chief executive Robert Kramer. Since 2018, El-Hibri and his wife, Nancy have donated at least \$150,000 to groups affiliated with the top Republican on the panel, Congressman Steve Scalise of Louisiana, the newspaper said.

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White House Says Nord Stream 2 'Bad Deal' When Asked to Confirm Sanctions Waiver

WASHINGTON, May 19 (Sputnik) – The United States considers Nord Stream 2 as a “bad deal,” White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre told reporters on Wednesday, when asked to confirm sanctions waiver.

“The administration has been clear that Nord Stream 2 pipeline is a bad deal. It is a Russian geopolitical project that threatens European energy security, Ukraine and Eastern flank NATO allies and partners,” Jean-Pierre said.

US President Joe Biden has reportedly decided to waive sanctions on the German company Nord Stream 2 AG and its CEO Matthias Warnig overseeing the construction of the natural gas pipeline under the Baltic Sea, in what the Axios news website called a show of compromise. Sanctions on Russian ships laying the pipes will likely remain.

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Biden Told Netanyahu He Expects 'Significant De-Escalation' With Palestine – White House

WASHINGTON, May 19 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden in a phone call with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said he expects significant de-escalation in the ongoing violent conflict with Palestine, the White House said on Wednesday.

"President Biden spoke with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu today. The two leaders had a detailed discussion on the state of events in Gaza, Israel's progress in degrading the capabilities of Hamas and other terrorist elements, and ongoing diplomatic efforts by regional governments and the United States. The President conveyed to the Prime Minister that he expected a significant de-escalation today on the path to a ceasefire," the White House said in a statement.

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North Macedonia Economy Rebounds, Aided by COVID-19 Vaccine Coverage - IMF

WASHINGTON, May 19 (Sputnik) – Economic Growth in North Macedonia is expected to approach 4 percent this year, a recovery made possible by increased with COVID-19 vaccinations, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) said on Wednesday.

"An economic rebound is underway, with real GDP growth projected to reach 3.8 percent in 2021, supported by growing vaccine coverage, following a shortage of supply earlier in the year," an IMF press release said.

A speedier than expected vaccine rollout could result in faster growth, while the emergence of new coronavirus variants could slow the recovery, the release added.

The IMF urged North Macedonia to preserve the operational independence of the nation's central bank, which the global lender called key to maintaining price stability - a precondition for sustainable growth.

The release called for monetary policy to remain accommodative, noting projections that a recent increase in inflation will most likely be temporary.

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US Designates Former Albanian President Sali Berisha Due to 'Corruption' – Blinken

WASHINGTON, May 19 (Sputnik) – The United States publicly designated former Albanian President Sali Berisha for his involvement in corruption, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a statement on Wednesday.

"Today, I am announcing the public designation of Sali Berisha, a former President of Albania, former Prime Minister of Albania, and former Member of Parliament of Albania, due to his involvement in significant corruption," Blinken said.

While leading the Albanian government, Berisha was involved in misappropriation of public funds, interfering with public processes, using his power for his own benefit, enriching his allies and family members, as well as other corruption acts, Blinken added.

"With this designation, I am reaffirming the need for accountability and transparency in Albania's democratic institutions, government processes, and the actions of Albanian public officials," he added.

In addition to Berisha, the United States designated his spouse, Liri Berisha, his son, Shkelzen Berisha, and his daughter, Argita Berisha Malltezi.

"These individuals are ineligible to travel to the United States," Blinken said.

Berisha was Albanian President in 1992-1997 and Prime Minister in 2005-2013.

US law prohibits American citizens from making business with designated persons, prevents their entry to the country and requires freezing all assets under US jurisdiction.

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